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World's 'happiest country' needs peace, reconciliation process

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By Suraj Budathoki

Bhutan's much-touted happiness rating lies atop a bed of pain. The pain of Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin. I know, because I am one of them.

I come from an average working-class family that lived in Bhutan for generations, with no interest or involvement in politics. My community, known in Bhutan as Lhotshampa, has traditionally lived in the south of the country.

In 1989, Bhutan conducted a national census and revoked our citizenship after retroactively implementing the 1985 Nationality Law. The policy of "national integration" and "revocation of citizenship" catalysed our community's large-scale exodus.

One night, the coal mine office at the Bhutan-India border where my father worked as a clerk was attacked and ransacked. The next day, security personnel picked up my father and severely beat him.

They questioned his patriotism and nationality and tried to get him to confess to the destruction or say who was behind it. My father, born to a simple farming family, had no clue. After this traumatic experience, he made the hard decision to leave the country.

Trauma

On March 3, 1990, we were among the Bhutanese who fled to save our lives. I was nine years old. We relocated to Timai, a Bhutanese refugee camp in eastern Nepal, where I grew up.

The United States Refugee Resettlement Program helped me relocate to America in 2009. Two years later, my family joined me. We are now well settled but I still want to heal the pain of dislocation. This is true not just for me but for all the Bhutanese traumatised by what happened in the 1990s.

Those who left Bhutan felt compelled by the threat to their lives, identity, culture, and language. In some cases, the state pushed them out through its crackdown on human rights and political activists, including some exiled Bhutanese and members of political parties accused of engaging in violence. Many are still in prison in Bhutan. The violence has decreased over the years, but this does not mean the establishment of positive peace.

Many Lhotshampa citizens are still missing, unaccounted numbers have been killed, and close to 50 political prisoners are serving life sentences in Bhutan's prisons.

On the positive side, the King recently released six political prisoners and commuted a capital punishment to life sentence.

In 2021, approximately 6,300 Bhutanese refugees still languished in two refugee camps in Nepal. Many of the over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees resettled in eight western countries, even if they have not been able to return 'home', feel intense love for their country of birth.

Peace Initiative Bhutan

That is what catalysed the movement Peace Initiative Bhutan, started in 2020 by diasporic Bhutanese whose families are divided between Bhutan and the countries they settled in.

The Initiative went public in April 2022, with the goal of ending the polarisation and distrust between many Bhutanese back home and overseas. Peace Initiative Bhutan currently functions under the auspices of Global Citizens Circle, founded in 1974 in the USA, catalysed by the Vietnam War, political assassinations, and the Civil Rights Movement.

The Circle has been involved in peace and reconciliation processes in Northern Ireland, South Africa and the Middle East. It aims to foster sustainable constructive change by bringing together intergenerational, diverse individuals from world leaders to local activists for courageous conversations necessary to build trust.

Peace Initiative Bhutan is not interested in 'defeating' the government in Thimphu. We want a 'win-win' solution. This will not be easy or quick. But it is possible through a sustained, holistic peacebuilding and reconciliation process, in which remorse, apology and forgiveness play a critical role.

The process, rooted in restorative rather than retributive justice, centres on fairness and justice which are prerequisites for addressing conflict. This was central to the Truth and Reconciliation Process in South Africa.

The past years have seen a growing realisation among Bhutanese at home and abroad about the futility of the conflict. The suffering of divided families is underpinned by the urge to visit their birth country and meet loved ones. Western education has also led to a visible shift in the thinking amongst exiled Bhutanese even as new thinking is evident among Bhutanese politicians.

This shift in perceptions and attitude makes it possible, perhaps, to find a pragmatic and peaceful resolution to the decades-old, seemingly intractable conflict. The disputing parties have a shared goal of making Bhutan genuinely happy and prosperous.

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Since the conflict, Bhutan has transitioned into a democracy with general elections every five years. It adopted its first Constitution in 2008 and established an independent judicial system. A silver lining to the conflict was also the formation of political parties that are now participating in the democratic process.

According to two United Nations triennial reviews, 2015 and 2018, Bhutan has met the criteria to graduate in 2023 from the category of least developed countries (LDCs) and rise above the poverty index.

The transition involves the loss of certain trade preferences and other international support measures. Overseas Bhutanese can help with this. Many are outstanding in the fields of academia, entrepreneurship and literature, yet consider themselves Bhutanese first.

Positives

This provides a great opportunity for Bhutan to have an international profile on a scale vaster than its physical area and population size.

The Bhutanese diaspora can now play a vital role in providing soft power to the home country, to garner international support and solidarity in Bhutan's favour.

I have spoken to many Bhutanese American business owners who want to contribute to Bhutan's economic development, its education sector, and in other fields, besides directly helping their family members who are in Bhutan. Many are eager for an opportunity to improve their relationship and reconcile differences with their country of birth.

Another positive is that Bhutan is a carbon-neutral country. Plus it has a happiness policy that is maturing, devoted to enhancing the happiness and progress of its people.

An opening to the Bhutanese in exile will also improve Bhutan's ranking in the World Happiness Report -- a ranking that it played a central role in establishing.

Last month, 17 young Bhutanese American professionals representing Peace Initiative Bhutan and other non-profit organisations visited Washington D.C and called on Congress and the Biden administration to help foster peace and reconciliation in Bhutan.

The delegates also promoted a message based on trust and mutual understanding, in hopes of reaching sustainable peace by reconciling the existing differences between the government of Bhutan and the exiled Bhutanese. The delegates also met with the Deputy Director of South and Central Asian Affairs under the US Department of State and Director for South Asia Regional Affairs National Security Brian Luti at the White House and asked for their continued support and engagement with Bhutan.

Common ground

Finding common ground is crucial for conflicting parties to come to a meaningful dialogue. The common ground in this situation lies in the desire to fulfil the aspirations of genuine gross national happiness in Bhutan.

Dealing with trauma means facing the fact that we have been harmed in some way. When we separate the action from the person who harmed us, we can help rehabilitate them and create new connections.

We need to learn to hate the game, not the player. Or, hate the sin, not the sinner. We are all against injustice, and there are many ways to seek justice. As Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye makes the world go blind."

To reconcile the people of Bhutan and bring peace, we need collaborative efforts. Community agencies, local organisations, religious leaders, politicians, the King of Bhutan, and businesses, all can play essential roles in this process.

We can deal with these issues using strategies that have worked in building peace elsewhere. Just one step in the right direction may make all the difference. Combining realism with hope may help us move toward a more peaceful future. We at the Initiative believe it is time for representatives of the Bhutan Government and the Bhutanese diaspora to sit down to discuss the future, focusing on agreement and accommodation.

Such a Bhutanese reconciliation would lead to a joyful, long-awaited reunion. The past should not stain our present and future. We can and must end animosity. We need to embrace each other and work on healing the wounds rather than making them deeper.

Connectivity vital for South Asian trade

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By NISCHAL DHUNGE

The geostrategic positioning of Nepal offers a unique opportunity to participate in numerous regional projects. Before engaging in such projects, it is essential to understand where its strengths lie concerning our connectivity, and the reasons holding back its connectivity with South Asian countries.

In this regard, improving connectivity through sub-regional cooperation such as the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) plays a crucial role in pushing forward social and economic development among these South Asian countries.

Following the failure of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to reach a consensus on a regional motor vehicle accord at the Kathmandu Summit in 2014, primarily due to resistance from Pakistan, the BBIN MVA

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connectivity project was proposed. The BBIN MVA seeks to build a roadbased economic corridor linking Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

Bhutan has not ratified the agreement but encouraged the other three to approve and engage in the pact. The BBIN MVA aims to promote the smooth movement of passengers, personal and vehicular cargo traffic within and between the BBIN countries. With only 5 per cent of the total trade in the region, intraregional trade in South Asia is among the lowest in the world.

Significant challenges lie before implementing massive connectivity projects like the BBIN MVA. Traders usually have to visit more than 10 agencies for documentation clearances.

The lack of accredited laboratories to certify export products often delays shipments by weeks. The lengthy border hold-ups add to the enormous trade costs among BBIN member nations.

Regarding infrastructure gaps, congested borders, long and diversionary transport routes, and low-quality roads increase trade cost and transit time which directly hampers the transport of goods and services. Besides these challenges, the development of inter-modal transshipment facilities, modern warehouse capacities, and gender-friendly infrastructure and trade and transit-related offices should be considered.

As Nepal is a landlocked mountainous nation with poor transportation infrastructure, improving road and railway connectivity is essential for the smooth flow of goods and services. Simplifying paperwork, advancing risk management practices to reduce physical checks, facilitating cross-border transit and modernising sanitary and phytosanitary measures will help streamline trade processes.

To enable importers and exporters to submit their paperwork electronically, the World Bank assists Bangladesh and Nepal in building single electronic gateways.

These National Single Windows which are anticipated to decrease clearing times require strong implementation support.

Upgradation of the roads connecting integrated check posts and inland container depots will help smoothen large volumes of crossborder trade.

Hence, modernising infrastructure and integrated border points, developing and upgrading cross-border and internal roads, and increasing multi-modal transport networks, including road and railways, helps to bridge the infrastructure gaps.

Also, local concepts such as border “haat” practised at the India-Bangladesh and India-Myanmar border points should be adopted on the South Asian countries, India-Nepal border to provide economic opportunities to small entrepreneurs and women traders.

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Looking at the composition of transport connectivity in Nepal, 90 per cent of goods and passenger transport services take place via road, 8 per cent by air and 2 per cent by rail, rope and others.

Nepal should prioritise high-quality road infrastructure to increase connectivity in the short term. At present, the upgradation of the east-west highway, which connects significant land ports (Birgunj, Biratnagar and Bhairahawa) is crucial for transport connectivity.

High quality road infrastructure could be initially expensive. However, investing in such massive projects is worthwhile in the long term. Several studies in high-, middle- and lowincome countries show a positive relationship between transport infrastructure and economic development.

Therefore, transport infrastructure becomes extremely important as it is the primary driver of economic growth. Nepal can tap into two huge markets – China and India – if she can develop advanced road and railway systems.

The Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) in Southeast Asia and the BBIN MVA in South Asia operate under a similar model (projectbased).

The GMS comprises six countries and is regarded as a successful development story. The GMS countries share the Mekong River in implementing high priority projects to facilitate doing business, accessing markets and engaging in other activities that comprehensively support trade and development in addition to developing infrastructure.

Similarly, the BBIN countries can follow in the footsteps of the GMS by leveraging their economic corridors and concentrating on priority sectors to foster regional harmony and integration by cementing strong ties between their peoples.

A recent World Bank report entitled Deepening Linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia examines new strategies for reviving trade and economic ties between the two regions, concentrating on sectors including digital systems, environmental goods and services.

The gross domestic product (GDP) gains would be significant, amounting to about 17.6 per cent for South Asia and 15.7 per cent for Southeast Asia. Nepal will benefit from such regional South Asia and Southeast Asia cooperation by engaging in high priority projects. Nepal confronts significant economic development obstacles due to electricity supply.

Recently, there has been some positive developments. Nepal and Bangladesh intend to hold meetings about bilateral power trade and Bangladeshi investment in Nepal's hydropower industry. The positive side of the bilateral power trade is that Nepal can buy power from Bangladesh during the winter and sell its power dominance during the rainy season.

This increases the prospect of improving energy trade not only with India but also with Bangladesh. In this regard, The Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC) Nepal Compact ushers in a new era in United States-Nepal Partnership, which aims to improve road quality, increase the availability and reliability of electricity, and facilitate cross-border electricity trade between Nepal and India.

The MCC Nepal Compact and bilateral power trade with Bangladesh will be an opportunity for Nepal to improve its connectivity and engage in power trade with India and Bangladesh respectively. Nepal can also benefit from new railway connectivity with another neighbouring country China.

The feasibility study for the proposed Kerung-Kathmandu railway project would significantly boost the development of a “crossHimalayan connectivity network” using transportation, ports for trade, roads and telecommunication. While implementing projects like the BBIN MVA, Nepal should be free from political ties and act in the country’s best interests. Swift implementation of high priority connectivity projects should be first on the agenda, bringing considerable macroeconomic benefits not limited to generating thousands of jobs for the Nepali people.

G Adventures restarts Bhutan, Australia and NZ trips

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The Kingdom of Bhutan next month reopens the historic Trans Bhutan Trail for the first time in 60 years.

The trail will be officially reopened in a formal ceremony in Bhutan on September 28, 2022.

As an exclusive launch partner G Adventures will be the first operator to take travellers along the Trans Bhutan Trail when the inaugural, sold-out, departure leaves on October 02, 2022.

G Adventures is also resuming trips to Australia and New Zealand this September.

, says the operator is excited to be heading back to these three countries which are some of the last to reopen to foreign travellers, and to be bringing tourism dollars back into local communities, specifically in Bhutan.

“We’re honoured to be working with the Bhutan Canada Foundation and the Trans Bhutan Trail to launch this newly restored route, and we’ve been thrilled with how popular the new trips have been,” Yves Marceau, VP of Product at G Adventures

There are two new active trekking itineraries available to book in Bhutan into 2023.

There is an 11-day Camp the Trans Bhutan Trail trip which features camping and homestays, and a 12-day Highlights of the Trans Bhutan Trail itinerary.

The two tours focus on trekking specially selected parts of the 403-km (250-mile) trail.

The trail features camping spots and overnights in comfortable local homestays.

BD's duty-free facility for Bhutan comes into effect

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By DOULOT AKTER MALA

Bangladesh has finally made the duty-free market-access facility under preferential trade agreement (PTA) effective for Bhutan through a much-awaited official gazette. The customs authority has offered tax waiver on import of 16 Bhutanese products by issuing a statutory regulatory order (SRO).

The SRO, signed by Internal Resources Division (IRD) Senior Secretary Abu Hena Md Rahmatul Muneem, came into effect on August 4.

With the SRO issuance, the duty-free market access under PTA officially came into effect on both ends of Bangladesh and Bhutan. The countries signed the PTA on December 6, 2020 in a bid to reduce or waive import tariff and para-tariff.

On July 1, 2022, Bhutan made the duty-free market access facility effective for around 100 Bangladeshi products under the PTA.

A senior customs official said from now on both the countries would be able to avail the benefits under the first-ever bilateral trade agreement of Bangladesh.

He noted that the duty-free list of products went through some procedural steps, including ratification by the authorities concerned of both the states.

The official, however, said the tax benefit had been offered on the basis of trade neutral rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Under the trade neutral rules, the member countries have to impose the same rates on imported products and domestically produced goods.

In case of readjustment of supplementary duty (SD) on local products in future, the SD rates in the list would be adjusted upward or downward, he added.

In the SRO, the customs authority exempted all types of import duty, SD, regulatory duty (if applicable) on the imported products - produced or processed in Bhutan.

The exemption was given on condition of compliance with the Rules for Determination of Origin of Goods for Bhutan-Bangladesh PTA (BB-PTA).

The products include: milk, wheat or meslin flour, homogenised preparations of jams, fruit jellies, marmalades, food preparation of soybean, wheat bran, quartzite,

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cement clinkers, portland cement, soap, particle board of wood, ferro-silicon, bars and rods of iron or non-alloy steel, wooden furniture of a kind used in offices, and wooden furniture of a kind used in bedroom.

However, import of mineral water and aerated water would enjoy 75 per cent waiver on SD - due to having the same rate of taxes on the items at local stage.

Bhutan offered duty-free benefit on import of Bangladeshi products, including baby clothes and clothing accessories, men's trousers and shorts, jackets and blazers, jute and jute goods, leather and leather goods, dry-cell battery, fan, watch, potato, condensed milk, cement, toothbrush, plywood, particle board, mineral and carbonated water, green tea, orange juice, pineapple juice, and guava juice.

In the fiscal year (FY) 2018-19, bilateral trade volume between the countries was US\$49.65 million.

Bhutan exported goods worth \$81.27 million to Bangladesh in 2019, while Bangladesh exported goods worth \$8.33 million to Bhutan.

According to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) data, Bangladesh earned \$9.5 million in FY 2021-22 by exporting products to Bhutan.